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ARRESTS MADE IN OPERATION TARGETING
NETWORK SELLING STOLEN NATIVE
AMERICAN ARTIFACTS

***TWO-YEAR UNDERCOVER OPERATION
IN FOUR CORNERS REGION LEADS TO NATION'S
LARGEST INVESTIGATION OF ARTIFACTS TAKEN FROM
PUBLIC, NATIVE AMERICAN LANDS***

SALT LAKE CITY – FBI and BLM agents, joined by the U.S. Marshals and local and state law enforcement partners, were simultaneously arresting defendants and executing search warrants in Utah Wednesday morning following a more than two-year undercover operation targeting a network of individuals allegedly involved in the sale, purchase, and exchange of artifacts illegally taken from public or Indian lands in the Four Corners region of the country. The investigation represents the nation's largest investigation of archaeological and cultural artifact thefts.

Twelve indictments charging 24 defendants with violations of the Archaeological Resources Protection Act (ARPA) and the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA) were unsealed this morning in Salt Lake City. Arrest warrants were issued for 23 of the 24 individuals charged as a part of the investigation. Twelve search warrants also are being executed. The case involves 256 artifacts totaling \$335,685.

The indictments were announced this morning in Salt Lake City by the Deputy Attorney General David W. Ogden of the U.S. Department of Justice; Ken Salazar, Secretary of the Interior; Brett L. Tolman, U.S. Attorney in Utah; Timothy J. Fuhrman, Special Agent in Charge of the FBI's Salt Lake City Field Office; and Larry Echo Hawk, Assistant Secretary of the Interior for Indian Affairs.

In addition to ARPA and NAGPRA violations, the indictments allege theft of government property, depredation of government property, and theft of Indian tribal property. The indictments unsealed today were returned by a grand jury in Utah and charge defendants in Utah, New Mexico, and Colorado. A list of defendants and the charges they face is included as an attachment to this press release. Defendants charged in federal indictments are presumed innocent unless or until proven guilty in court.

"These archaeological treasures are precious and protecting them preserves a rich history and heritage. That is why the Justice Department will use all of its tools to vigorously enforce the laws designed to safeguard the cultural heritage of Native Americans," said Deputy Attorney General Ogden. "Recommitting resources and focus to criminal justice in Indian Country is of paramount importance to the Justice Department. We are currently conducting a training initiative with the Interior Department for federal prosecutors and law enforcement personnel on looting, vandalism, and illegal trafficking of cultural heritage, and are planning to reach out to with Indian Country leaders in the near future to engage in an ongoing consultation on these issues."

"Let this case serve notice to anyone who is considering breaking these laws and trampling our nation's cultural heritage that the BLM, the Department of Justice, and the federal government will track you down and bring you to justice," said Secretary Salazar. "As these alleged criminals are prosecuted and as federal agents continue to hunt down wrong doers, BLM cultural resources staff will work to ensure the proper recovery, identification, repatriation, and storage of the artifacts that have been confiscated.

"The indictments unsealed today charge a group of defendants, largely excavators, dealers, and collectors, with serious violations of federal law," U.S. Attorney Tolman said today. "Those who remove or damage artifacts on public or tribal lands take something from all of us. These treasures are the heritage of all Americans, and in many cases, the objects are sacred to Native Americans. The notion that you can take whatever you want from public lands is wrong. Individuals engaged in this kind of conduct will be investigated and prosecuted."

“The FBI has taken this matter seriously and spent a significant amount of personnel and financial resources in exposing this network of individuals illegally trafficking in these items,” said FBI Special Agent in Charge Fuhrman. “The FBI remains committed to devoting all necessary resources to address this problem.”

“The problem American Indian and Alaska Native tribes face of looters robbing them of their cultural patrimony is a major law enforcement issue for federal agencies responsible for enforcing historic preservation laws in Indian Country,” said Assistant Secretary of the Interior for Indian Affairs Larry Echo Hawk. “Today’s action should give tribes reassurance that the Obama Administration is serious in preserving and protecting their cultural property.”

The Four Corners region, rich in archaeological resources, contains artifacts that are vitally important to the scientific, academic, and Native American communities. The illegally obtained relics include decorated Anasazi pottery, an assortment of burial and ceremonial masks, a buffalo headdress, and ancient sandals known to be associated with Native American burials. Additionally, improperly excavated archeological sites mean a significant amount of historical information is lost because the artifacts are not identified in the context of where they were located.

Defendants will have initial appearances before U.S. Magistrate Judge Samuel Alba at the Grand County Courthouse in Moab Wednesday. The U.S. Attorney’s Office is seeking to detain one of the defendants. Others will be ordered to maintain and store in current condition all artifacts in their possession and engage in reasonable efforts to protect them from damage, destruction, loss or theft. One defendant is not being arrested and will be issued a summons to appear in federal court.

ARPA prohibits the unauthorized excavation and removal of archaeological resources on federal lands as well as the unlawful sale, purchase, or exchange of such resources. Under NAGPRA, any Native American human remains, funerary objects, objects of cultural patrimony and sacred objects must be repatriated to Indian tribes. The BLM will consult with tribes to determine cultural affiliation and to facilitate repatriation. For artifacts not subject to NAGPRA, the BLM will work with museums to stabilize, identify, and preserve them under the provisions of ARPA, and make them available for scientific research and public education.

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